Paraffin

I’ve seen the old man day after day
Walking round and round
And up and down the high street,
Muttering under his breath,
Talking to himself
With a stupid smirk on his weatherbeaten face.

And in that face there is no trace of pain:
Madness has its merits.

He wears the same woollen hat;
Filthy gloves: one black, one green;
The same coat.
But sometimes he wears boots, and other times, trainers,
So he is not quite lost;
Someone, or some institution cares,
If only a thimbleful.

He turns my stomach
And makes me wince visibly
When he forages in the rubbish bins around the old club,
Coming up with a bag of stale French fries,
A few dregs from a coke can,
A half-eaten burger...
And devours them shamelessly.

People stare at him and laugh.

Once I called him over to me
And gave him thirty pence.
He took it
With a mumbled, incoherent word of thanks,
And stumbled on.

My partner seemed never to notice him,

But if he had,
Or I’d pointed the tramp out to him,
He would, doubtless, as he had of another before,
Screw up his face in a contemptuous grin
And slowly mouth the appellation: *Paraffin*!

And I would bow my head to bear his shame,
And think
That but for the grace of fly-pitching
I might myself own up to such a name.